

Compatibility Determination

Use: Snowmobiling

Supporting and Incidental Uses: Hunting, fishing, trapping, natural resource gathering, firewood cutting, camping, picnicking, cross-country skiing, wildlife photography and videography, snowshoeing, pets, Willie Goodwin/Archie Ferguson Memorial Snowmachine Race, scientific research, wildlife observation.

Refuge Name: Selawik National Wildlife Refuge

Establishment and Acquisition Authority: The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) established the 2.5-million-acre Selawik National Wildlife Refuge (Selawik refuge, refuge) as part of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Wildlife Refuge System (Department of the Interior) on December 2, 1980.

Selawik Refuge Purposes: As stated in ANILCA Section 302 (7) (B), the purposes for which the Selawik refuge was established and shall be managed include:

- (i) to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to, the Western Arctic caribou herd (including participation in coordinated ecological studies and management of these caribou), waterfowl, shorebirds and other migratory birds, and salmon and Sheefish;
- (ii) to fulfill international treaty obligations of the United States with respect to fish and wildlife and their habitats;
- (iii) to provide, in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in subparagraphs (i) and (ii), the opportunity for continued subsistence uses by local residents; and
- (iv) to ensure, to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in subparagraph (i), water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge.

The purpose of the congressionally designated Selawik Wilderness Area is to secure an enduring resource of wilderness, protect and preserve the wilderness character of the area as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS), and administer the area for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave it unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as designated wilderness.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended [16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee]).

Description of Uses

This determination re-evaluates the compatibility of snowmobiles for access to the Selawik refuge. Snowmobiles were originally found to be compatible during the preparation of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Selawik refuge in 1987. Snowmobiles were again found compatible, subject to reasonable regulation, in 1994. The Alaska refuge regulations define a snowmobile as “a self-propelled vehicle intended for off-road vehicle travel primarily on snow [and] having a curb weight of not more than 1,000 pounds driven by track or tracks in contact with the snow and driven by a ski or skis in contact with the snow” (50 CFR 36.32). Alaska refuge regulations also specify that snowmobiles are only allowed during periods of adequate snow cover. Adequate snow cover is defined as an amount of snow, distributed in a continuous manner, which will protect underlying vegetation from adverse effects. Selawik refuge staff considers adequate snow cover for this use to be at least six inches.

Snowmobiles are an important means of transportation for subsistence and local recreation activities on refuge lands. Snowmobiles are also used to access private lands within the refuge. Snowmobile use on the refuge may begin as early as October and continues through April. A system of marked winter trails cross the refuge, linking villages in the region. The majority of snowmobile use takes place on these well-established inter-village trails.

Snowmobiles are also used in community events within the refuge boundary. Most events (e.g., ice fishing, educational camps, and snowmobile races) occur on private land and river corridors under the jurisdiction of the State of Alaska. Between the villages of Noorvik and Selawik, small sections of refuge land are used when safe and practical alternatives are not available. The Willie Goodwin/Archie Ferguson Memorial Snowmachine Race is an example of a community event involving snowmobiles that occurs on both private and refuge lands. This race was established in the early 1970s when snowmobiles first became available to residents. The route is from Kotzebue to Noorvik, Kiana, Selawik, Noorvik, and returns to Kotzebue following existing inter-village winter trails. The one-day event has extensive support from all participating communities along its route and throughout the region. Most of the 220-mile race occurs on village or Native Corporation lands, frozen rivers, or the Kotzebue Sound. Less than 10 miles of the race route is on refuge land. This race requires a special use permit.

Availability of Resources

Adequate refuge personnel and base operational funds are available to manage this use. Currently, monitoring is conducted by talking with local residents; meeting with local tribal, borough, and city councils; and during over flights of the refuge conducted for other purposes.

Anticipated Impacts of Uses

Potential impacts of snowmobile use include noise pollution and disturbance of wildlife and underlying vegetation. Because the majority of snowmobile use occurs on established trails, disturbance to vegetation is expected to be minor and localized. In instances where snowmobiles leave the established trails, there may be small amounts of damage to shrub branches above the snow level. Snow depths over the tundra can vary between several feet to bare ground due to the region's high winds. Occasionally, there will be wind-blown areas traveled over by snowmobiles where snow depth is less than six inches. The ground in these areas will typically be frozen and the snow hard packed, providing protection to underlying vegetation. The impacts from snowmobile use will be minimal, allowing the vegetation to rejuvenate over the course of one growing season.

The possible introduction of invasive plant species, perhaps from seeds carried on snowmobiles or sleds, could affect resources on refuge lands. Given the refuge's remote location, it is not common for snowmobiles to be transported or driven in from other areas of the State or the continent. The source of invasive species would most likely be from areas immediately adjacent to the refuge, if potentially invasive species exist there. No introduction of invasive species is known to have occurred on refuge lands to date. Refuge staff will be vigilant to detect potential invasive species.

Snowmobile use on the refuge may temporarily disturb subsistence species, including moose and caribou (McTaggart 1981; Creel et al. 2002). Noise associated with snowmobile activity at high levels or during critical periods can have negative effects on moose and caribou energy budgets, reproductive success, and long-term survival (Fancy and White 1985). For moose, the presence of snowmobile trails in deep snow years can increase access to winter forage and greatly improve over winter survival. Such impacts, both positive and negative, would be higher near villages. In most of the refuge, such disturbances to moose and caribou would be infrequent given the anticipated level of use and numbers of the respective species in the area used by those traveling by snowmobile.

Denning bears are also known to be susceptible to disturbance by snowmobiles (Jonkel 1980). Brown bears on the refuge tend to den at higher elevations with limited snowmobile access. The character of the Selawik Wilderness Area could be altered by increased noise disturbance; this disturbance is expected to be minimal since this designated wilderness area is characterized by stands of spruce and deep snow, which are typically avoided by the public when traveling via snowmobile.

The Willie Goodwin/Archie Ferguson Memorial Snowmachine Race will have no biological impacts on the refuge since it occurs over existing trails, doesn't significantly add to the amount of overall snowmobile traffic and is of short duration (one day). During this one race event, there may be an increased risk of collision with other snowmobile users or individuals on dog sleds or skis using the trail. This risk is minimized by the widespread public notice prior to the race, which is required by permit stipulation, and presence of race monitors along the trail route during the event.

Public Review and Comment

Public comments were solicited concurrently with the revision of the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment (USFWS 2010). Public comments on compatibility determinations were accepted during the public review period for the draft plan and announced in the Federal Register. The public comment period was October 21, 2010 to March 15, 2011, which provided 145 days for public review. We mailed the full draft plan and a summary to the individuals and organizations on our mailing list. We invited public comments through an advertisement in a local newspaper and attended city council meetings in Selawik and Noorvik to receive comments on the draft plan. Planning team members met with the Citizen's Advisory Commission on Federal Areas to discuss the issues at Selawik refuge and alternatives that were proposed in the draft plan. The draft compatibility determinations were posted on the Service's Region 7 Web page.

We received no comments on the draft of this compatibility determination. Overall, there was wide support for the use of public lands for competitive events such as snowmobile races and cultural events that establish a positive relationship between visitors or area residents and the refuge.

Refuge Determination (check one below)

☐ Use is not compatible

☒ Use is compatible

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

Visitors will be required to comply with all regulations in place, such as seasonal closures for resource protection. The Archie Ferguson-Willie Goodwin Sr. Memorial Snowmobile Race organizers will be required to comply with the following special conditions:

1. Failure to abide by any part of this special use permit; violation of any refuge related provision in Titles 43 (Part 36) or 50 (Sub-chapters B and C), Code of Federal Regulations; or violation of any pertinent State regulation (e.g., fish or game violation) will, with due process, be considered grounds for immediate revocation of this permit and could result in denial of future permit requests for lands administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This provision applies to all persons working under the authority of this permit (e.g., assistants and volunteers). Appeals of decisions relative to permits are handled in accordance with Title 50 Code of Federal Regulations 36.41.
2. The permit holder is responsible for ensuring that all employees, party members, contractors, aircraft pilots, and any other persons working for the permit holder and conducting activities allowed by this permit are familiar with and adhere to the conditions of this permit; and posses at all times a signed copy of this permit while exercising these granted privileges.
3. This permit may be canceled or revised at any time by the refuge manager in case of emergency (e.g., unusual resource problems, lack of snow, flooding, etc.).
4. The permit holder and permit holder's clients do not have the exclusive use of the site(s) or lands covered by this permit.
5. Any problems with wildlife and/or animals taken in defense of life or property must be reported immediately to the refuge manager and Alaska Department of Fish and Game and be salvaged in accordance with State regulations.
6. In accordance with the Archaeological Resources Protection Act (16 USC 470aa), the removal or disturbance of archaeological or historical artifacts is prohibited. The excavation, disturbance, collection, or purchase of historical, recent, ethnological, or archaeological specimens or artifacts is prohibited.
7. The permit holder shall maintain his/her use areas in a neat and sanitary condition. If used, latrines must be located at least 150 feet from springs, lakes, and streams to avoid contamination of water resources. All property must be removed from refuge lands upon completion or revocation of permitted activities, and permit holder will leave the surrounding grounds in a neat, clean, and orderly condition. If the permit holder fails to remove all property upon completion of authorized activities, he/she will be liable for the removal and restoration of the site.
8. The use of off-road vehicles (except snowmobiles on established trails) is prohibited.
9. Any action by a permit holder or the permit holder's employees that unduly interferes with or harasses other refuge visitors or impedes access to any site is strictly prohibited.
10. Construction of tent platforms, cabins, or other permanent structures is prohibited.
11. Fuel caches are prohibited.

12. The operation of aircraft at altitudes and in flight paths resulting in the herding, harassment, hazing, or driving of wildlife is prohibited. It is recommended that all aircraft, except for takeoff and landing, maintain a minimum altitude of 2,000 feet above ground level.
13. The use of helicopters is prohibited.
14. Public notice will be given to all areas along the route of travel; at a minimum, notice must be given over the radio and on the OTZ scanner. The date, time, start and finish locations, and route of travel will be included. Notice must be available at least one week in advance of the race and continue to be available until the end of the race.
15. During the event, no participants shall travel on refuge lands outside the trail segment specified on the permit.

Justification

ANILCA Section 811 provides for snowmobile access for subsistence purposes, and Section 1110 allows the use of snowmobiles for traditional activities and for travel to and from villages and home sites. Snowmobiles allow access for a majority of winter activities on refuge lands and, at current use levels, support many compatible refuge activities. Snowmobiles are an essential form of transportation for village residents residing within refuge boundaries. Regulations defining the size and weight of snowmobiles, coupled with the requirement that adequate snow cover be present, eliminate most potential for damage to habitat. The current level of snowmobile use on Selawik refuge, including the one identified race, would have negligible adverse effects on wildlife and habitat. If the intensity of snowmobile use increases greatly, disturbance to sensitive wildlife species and habitats, such as bears in dens and wind-scoured areas with insufficient snow cover, may occur. The refuge will continue to monitor snowmobile use levels and winter travel conditions and may take restrictive action if conditions warrant. After fully considering the impacts of this activity, as described previously in the "Anticipated Impacts of Use" section of this determination, it is my determination that snowmobile use within the refuge does not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes of the refuge or mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System but in fact contributes to them.

Supporting Documents

Creel, S., J. E. Fox, A. R. Hardy, J. Sands, B. Garrot, and R. O. Peterson. 2002. Snowmobile activity and glucocorticoid stress responses in wolves and elk. *Conservation Biology* 16(3): 809.

Fancy, S. G., and R. G. White. 1985. Energy expenditures by caribou while cratering in snow. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 49(4): 987-993.

Jonkel, C. J. 1980. Black, brown, and polar bears. Pages 227-228 in *Big game of North America: Ecology and management* J. L. Schmidt and D. L. Gilbert, eds. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books.

McTaggart-Cowan, I. 1981. Wildlife conservation issues in northern Canada. Canadian Environmental Advisory Council Report, no. 11. University of Calgary, Canada.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Wilderness Review and Environmental Impact Statement. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska. 378 pp.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987b. Record of Decision: Selawik National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan, Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness Review, and Wild River Plan. U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, Alaska. 15 pp.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2010. Draft Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, AK. 285 pp (plus ten appendices).

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2011. Final Revised Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Selawik National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Anchorage, AK.

Refuge Determination

Refuge Manager/
Project Leader Approval:


Lee Anne Ayres

14 July 2011
Date

Concurrence

Regional Chief
National Wildlife
Refuge System:


Mitch Ellis

7-20-2011
Date

Mandatory 10-year Re-evaluation Date: 2021

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Decision

☐ Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Memorandum
☐ Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Memorandum
☒ Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact
☐ Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision